



MISSISSIPPI MUSEUM *of* ART
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Mississippi Museum of Art Presents the *Bethlehem Tree* ***Eighteenth-Century Crèche Collection Highlights 2011 Holiday Season***

(Jackson, Miss.) . . . Once again this year during the holidays, Mississippians of all ages can experience the awe and spirit of the season when they visit the *Bethlehem Tree: Younger Foundation Crèche Collection* at the Mississippi Museum of Art. The *Bethlehem Tree* illuminates Trustmark Grand Hall from December 6, 2011 through January 8, 2012.

Now in its fourth year, this inspiring display features more than 100 authentic eighteenth-century Neapolitan angel and Nativity figures in an opulent Italian crèche setting surrounding a traditional Christmas tree. In addition to the figures of Mary, Joseph, Jesus, and the Three Magi, the collection includes a host of angels and more than 75 townspeople from all walks of life that populate the space on and around the tree, breathing life into the Nativity scene.

The collection was inspired by a 1985 trip to New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art (the Met) by Mrs. Jewell Younger Graeber of Marks, Mississippi. There she first viewed the world-renowned Angel Tree exhibition and was so

moved that she began to build her own collection of handcrafted Italian figures through private venues and auction houses such as Sotheby's and Christie's.

Like those on display at the Met, the figures in the Younger collection are made of metal wrapped in hemp. The heads and shoulders are painted terra cotta; the eyes, glass. Hands and feet are made of wood. Each figure is dressed in a costume of meticulous and minute detail.

The collection is curated by Mrs. Graeber's daughter, Gay Graeber Stubbs of Oxford. "This display was specifically collected and displayed for the children of Mississippi," said Stubbs. "When my mother and daddy viewed the breathtaking Metropolitan Museum of Art's Angel Tree, Mother watched the faces of small children light up with wonder at the scene. Her comment was, 'The children of New York are so fortunate to see this. The children of Mississippi would never have this experience.'"

After a lot of thought, correspondence with the Howard family (the original owners of the collection presented annually at the Met), and through auction houses, Mrs. Graeber began collecting these eighteenth-century Italian figures for a display, purchasing her first four in 1987.

In Italy, these Nativity scenes are known as *crèches* or *presepi*. The word *crèche* (pronounced "kresh") is derived from the French word for manger, the trough used for livestock feed in which the infant Jesus was placed after His birth. Italians refer to the Nativity as "il presepe," from the Latin *praesaepe*, *prae* "in front," and *saepire*, "to enclose," together translated as manger.

Saint Francis of Assisi is credited with reenacting the first Nativity in 1223 near the Italian town of Greccio. He prepared a manger with straw and surrounded it with figures of animals. After the evening's celebration of Christmas Mass, numerous claims of miracles surfaced, and the practice of recreating the Nativity spread throughout Europe.

The Mississippi Museum of Art continues the tradition with the welcoming light of the *Bethlehem Tree* so that Mississippians, young and old, can experience the wonder of the season and the beauty of the Younger collection.

"It is with great delight that we are able to share this treasure with the children of Mississippi in the capital city of our state," said Stubbs.

This year's *Bethlehem Tree* installation is especially meaningful for the Museum and Mrs. Graeber's family. In August, Mrs. Graeber passed away at the age of eighty-eight.

Museum Director Betsy Bradley said, "We are so pleased to present the *Bethlehem Tree* this year. We can offer no greater tribute to Mrs. Graeber's life than this magnificent installation. It was her personal gift to the children of Mississippi, in return for which she asked nothing more than the joy and hope this season evokes."

The Museum is hosting a tree lighting ceremony on December 6, 2011, at 5:45 PM to coincide with the Museum's monthly presentation of Music in the City. December's musical program includes the harmonious thanksgivings of the St. Andrew's Episcopal Cathedral Choir. As a gift to the community, holiday treats, cider, and admission are free of charge. Music in the City is sponsored by Wise

Carter Child & Caraway, P.A. The *Bethlehem Tree: Younger Foundation Crèche Collection* is sponsored by Atmos Energy.

Museum hours are Tuesday through Saturday, 10 AM to 5 PM and Sunday, noon to 5 PM. The Museum is closed Monday. Admission to the *Bethlehem Tree* is free and open to the public.

For more information about the Mississippi Museum of Art's exhibitions, programs, and special events, please call 601-960-1515 or 1-866-VIEW ART, or visit www.msmuseumart.org.

The Mississippi Museum of Art and its programs are sponsored in part by the city of Jackson and the Jackson Convention & Visitors Bureau. Support is also provided in part by funding from the Mississippi Arts Commission, a state agency, and in part by the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency.